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ABSTRACT

This essay considers connections between rural American life, livelihood, academics, and community. Two major areas are addressed: curricular issues in rural high schools and the nature of community and its central influence on the rural school. Historically youth who stayed in their rural community did not require preparation for higher education. A pre-college, or academic, curriculum in local high schools was thought by many rural residents to smack of elitism. After World War II, the metropolitan model of preparing youth for postsecondary education was imposed on rural schools. Rural educators increasingly came to believe that their job was to export as many able students as possible via college preparation programs. Since universities required increasing numbers of college equivalency units that were expensive to provide in small schools, consolidated schools were seen as real progress among remaining rural elites. However, rural high schools are not only educational institutions, but community hubs. The emerging belief that high schools need to focus on academic standards and not on local sporting or cultural events often results in a traumatic confrontation between the rural community and the school. Rural educators have a choice. They can try to rebuild rural communities and help reconnect schools to places rather than using them as sorting machines for exporting children to metropolitan America. But in the cacophony of "globalism" today, this is a losing battle. The other choice is to understand that high schools today need to prepare youths for post-high school possibilities as well as whatever is locally possible. But local values and hopes for local livelihoods should not be deprecated as somehow inferior to academic interests. (TD)

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Dilemmas of Rural Life and Livelihood: Academics and Community

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Dilemmas Of Rural Life and Livelihood:
Academics and Community

Alan J. DeYoung, University of Kentucky

In this brief essay I want to consider connections between rural American life, livelihood, academics, and community. No new data are presented here. Rather, the intention is to connect several different scholars, and their disciplines, who have wrestled with such matters in American schools during the past hundred years. The issues and dilemmas subsumed under these headings are not only pedagogical ones: they speak to the very central questions about what is to be learned and by whom. These are cultural, political and social matters, and they are well rehearsed in the historical and sociological literature on the rural American school for those who seek to discover them. The following discussion contains two primary headings. The first addresses curricular matters of American rural schools, the second addresses the nature of community and its central influence on the rural school in America.

Livelihood Versus Academics: The Larger Picture

What schools in rural America look like "then" and "now" has been the focus of much historical work. From colonial days until the industrial revolution, most Americans (who were then rural) resisted compulsory public (state mandated or controlled) education. For many, matters of livelihood or practicality preceded academic interests, and rural Americans historically resisted intellectual preoccupations as well as places where such things would be taught . Historians like Henry Perkinson and David Tyack argue that overcoming such a national resistance to public schooling in America is a first-

order intellectual topic. For rural schools, the route is indirect: the ascendance of American public education is primarily a story of how city needs and interests turned into state and then national ones. Even following the Common School Movement, rural schools and communities have typically been last to join the rush for increased compulsory attendance laws, state academic standards, or national outcomes assessments.

The simplest interpretation of rural hesitation to embrace the claims of most public education is clear: rural livelihood only recently has been understood as requiring advanced schooling. Staying in or close to one's rural community did not previously demand preparation for higher education, or what from here on I will term *academics*. Our national populist legacy also mitigated first against education beyond elementary school, then beyond the 8th grade in most of the rural US. Fully state-provided free elementary school became acceptable or desirable in most of rural America by about 1900. But even then, a pre-college curriculum in the local high schools (i.e., "academics") was thought by many to smack of elitism. Rural citizens therefore often declined the opportunity to fully fund academic programs in country high schools, preferring instead to support vocational programs and extracurricular events and activities (Peshkin, 1978).

What one did for a living and where one lived had to change in the country - as it had in the city - for major education reforms to occur. Demographic and economic changes in livelihood and community, in other words, preceded new consensual definitions of education and academics (Durkheim, 1933; Tyack, 1974).

Changes came first in the cities and in the creation of city schools. Rural schools had typically relied on partial subsidies from state and local governments to function, and

had volunteer administrators and partially trained teachers to run and teach them. They had limited curricula and made little pretense to train children for jobs. Parents would serve this function in agricultural or extractive industry communities. Cities, though, were another matter. Social issues (e.g., immigration, industrialization, urban blight, and child-labor matters) transformed education from a parent matter to a civic one for those who called for new and increased school control (Perkinson, 1995). City leaders and new professional educators eschewed the idea that voluntary and neighborhood schools could build cities, and the model of the rural school was quickly castigated as being parochial and backwards (Cubberley, 1914). City education issues first drove urban curricular and instructional reforms that later became enshrined in state education policy and then were disseminated throughout the countryside.

Battles at the High School

Most of this paper's focus is on the nature of high school curricula: academic instruction versus more practical courses. Rural and city common (elementary) schools were fairly similar in terms of curriculum, although the organization often differed by the early 20th century, with rural schools using one room and city schools using graded classrooms. Once the battle over compulsory elementary schooling had been "won," the later pedagogical battle over secondary school curricula, instruction and community was taken up. Various Progressive Educators argued that the battle over livelihood, academics and community were cultural and political, not only curricular (Kliebard, 1986). Secondary schools, they claimed, ought not prepare all children for college, nor only for skilled or unskilled trades.

John Dewey actually proposed that under the right circumstances, the academic could intersect with livelihood and community in the cities, which he feared would not happen if college preparation and liberal arts instruction became central in 20th century high schools. He suggested that the "practical" learning found in the countryside was more authentic than the book knowledge (academics) championed by many school reformers; he noted that the primary contest was between those who used secondary schools for elite preparation and would continue to do so, and those who would require an educational experience more closely connected to real life and real places. His curriculum was dedicated to including and redefining education for the "doers" and the "makers," not just the "information accumulators:"

> If we go back a few centuries, we find a practical monopoly of learning. The term possession of learning was, indeed, a happy one. Learning was a class matter. … A high-priesthood of learning, which guarded the treasure of truth and which doled it out to the masses under severe restrictions, was the inevitable expression of these conditions. But, as a direct result of the industrial revolution of which we have been speaking, this has been changed. … The result has been an intellectual revolution. Learning has been put into circulation. While there still is, and probably always will be, a particular class having the special business of inquiry in hand, a distinctively learned class is henceforth out of the question. It is an anachronism. Knowledge is no longer an immobile solid; it has been liquified. It is actively moving in all the currents of society itself. …all this means a necessary change in the attitude of the school, one of which we are as yet far from realizing the full force. Our school methods, and to a very considerable extent our curriculum, are inherited from the period when learning and command of certain symbols, affording as they did the only access to learning, were all-important. The ideas of this period are still largely in control, even where the outward methods and studies have been changed. It is an education dominated almost entirely by the medieval conception of learning. It is something which appeals for the most part simply to the intellectual aspect of our natures, our desire to learn, to accumulate information, and to get control of the symbols of learning; not to our impulses and tendencies to make, to do, to create, to produce, whether in the form of utility or of art.
>
> While training for the procession of learning is regarded as the type of culture, as a liberal education, that of a mechanic, a musician, a lawyer, a doctor, a farmer, a merchant, or a railroad manager is regarded as purely

> technical and professional. The result is that which we see about us everywhere--the division into "cultured" people and "workers," the separation of theory and practice. ... If we were to conceive our educational end and aim in a less exclusive way, if we were to introduce into educational processes the activities which appeal to those whose dominant interest is to do and to make, we should find the hold of the school upon its members to be more vital, more prolonged, containing more of culture.

The Rural American High School

Although Dewey described the battle over academics and community in moral and pedagogical terms, most Americans yet avoided much of this controversy at the high school level in the early 20th century as they had earlier at the elementary level before the Civil War. They simply did not pursue secondary schooling. That changed when federal vocational education funds were made available to many city and country high schools following the 1917 Smith-Hughes act. High school enrollments began to grow dramatically at this point. Now for the first time training for careers, not only preparing for the university, was legitimated and also partially funded by the federal government. Vocational and agricultural education programs and courses in cities and towns mushroomed (Perkinson, 1995).

Sociologist Martin Trow documents that the period from 1870 to 1940 indeed saw a major "first transformation" in American secondary education dedicated to preparing young people for the world of work rather than for colleges and universities (Trow, 1961).. He explains nicely why the secondary school became important first to city families, then later to many rural places as these fell into the industrial orbit of metropolitan areas. Importantly, he argues that the organization and curricula of most American high schools before World War 2 became dedicated to providing a "terminal" pedagogical function, dedicated in our sense to "livelihood ."

> The (previous) economy based on thousands of small farms and businesses has been transformed into one based on large bureaucratized organizations characterized by centralized decision-making and administration carried out through coordinated managerial and clerical staffs. ... When small organizations grow large, papers replace verbal orders; papers replace rule-of-thumb calculations of price and profit; papers carry records of work flow and inventory that in a small operation can be seen at a glance on the shop floor and materials shed. And, as organizations grew, people had to be trained to handle those papers - to prepare them, to type them, to file them, to process them, to assess and use them. … the creation of a system of mass secondary education … needed its own curriculum and its own teacher-training programs and institutions. … (the new) centers of professional education were not identified with the older, elite traditions of higher education, but created their own traditions of education for life, for citizenship, for useful tasks, the traditions, that is, of the mass democratic terminal secondary system that came to full flower between 1910 and 1940 (p 148).

Trow then documents that a more painful transformation began after the war in many high schools, both urban and rural. This transformation redefined and reorganized high schools that had become adept at functioning as mass terminal schools into mass preparatory ones. Echoing that earlier change, higher education institutions today are seen as terminal sites in preparing young people for "livelihood." – necessary to improve their economic and occupational status just as high schools once were. Trow argues that there is a huge problem of transforming American high schools since mid-century in America. Not only do existing high schools have to redefine their purpose as mass preparatory institutions, they still must find a way to educate those who plan on using the high school as a terminal places. And they need to do so without stigmatizing this latter, increasingly smaller group. His prediction from 40 years ago now has proven prescient in our own era:

> As a result of the close relationship between education and occupation a situation may soon be reached when the educational institutions legitimize social inequality by individualizing failure. Democratization of the means of

> education together with the internalizing of the achievement ethic by members of the working-class strata may lead to an individualizing of their failure, to a loss of self respect which in turn modifies an individual's attitude both to his group and to the demands made upon him (sic) by his society (p. 158).

How the transformations discussed by Trow and others played out earlier in the real life in rural high schools can be glimpsed in the seminal work of August Hollingshead. In Elmtown's Youth, the situation is defined in social class and school organizational terms. At least two camps had developed in Elmtown's high school: one, the elite students with higher education aspirations and their teachers; the other, the larger majority content with attaining local occupational opportunities and who typically undertook more general or commercial coursework. When the local norm supported and enabled a terminal curriculum within the high school, the local status system partially favored those not planning on going to college. But there was clearly status competition occurring within and without the school: the "doers" and the "makers" and their teachers were clearly at odds with the information "accumulators," as Dewey would have called them:

> Because the academic teachers believe that college preparatory students have more ability, are more interested, and do better work than those in the general course, they prefer to teach the former group. Although these contentions may be true, more probably teachers of the college preparatory group satisfy their desire to see the students reflect the academic values they hold. These teachers look upon students in the general course as persons who have nothing better to do with their time, are mediocre in ability, and lack motivation and interest. Students in the commercial courses are believed to be lower in ability than those in the general course. ... The vocational teachers differ from the academic teachers in their estimates of student ability, as they do in most things relative to the school; they believe that students specializing in their courses are as bright as the rest of the lot. These divergent beliefs between the two groups are in part a defense of their own interests and in part a result of the thinly veiled animosity that prevails between the academic and the vocational teachers. Each teacher in the vocational subjects--agriculture, home economics, shop, band, and

> secretarial science--has an especially equipped room. Teachers in the traditional subjects--English, algebra, geometry, Latin, French, chemistry, physics, and history--believe that too much money is spent out of the limited school budget to equip these rooms. They are correct in their argument that more money is invested in this equipment than in all the rest of the school; moreover, it is comparatively new, whereas the academic teachers have to use equipment that dates as far back as 1890. Salary differences between the two groups is another potent source of friction, since the highest salaries are paid to the vocational and the lowest to the academic teachers. The cleavage between the academic and non-academic interests enter into every aspect of school life--curriculum, grades, student government, athletics, and the cliques in which one participates (pp. 171-172).

Social class and the linkage between public schooling and different futures became stronger throughout the 20th century with continued decline of rural communities. High schools even began to specialize in tracking students toward forecast futures by the 1950s. Those most gifted, or who were from homes where parents had realized that college enrollment was the key to upward social mobility, could pursue liberal studies required for college entry. Those demonstrating less "talent" or "interest" would be able to obtain a more general or vocational education. By the 1960s it was clear in many metropolitan schools that the organization favored those seeking post-secondary schooling, especially if they were from middle- and upper-middle-class families (Cicourel and Kitsuse, 1961).

Comprehensive high schools were thus increasingly popular, where each "track" could be developed, students recruited, and differing curricula provided. In rural America, the argument that high schools increasingly ought to provide preparation for the university meant two things. On the one hand, rural teachers and administrators increasingly came to believe that their students, too, needed to leave many local

communities to be successful. Their job was thus to export as many able students as possible via college preparation programs (DeYoung and Lawrence, 1995). Secondly, in order to achieve this aim, it became increasingly clear that smaller community high schools were a problem. They needed to be consolidated into larger ones (Conant, 1959). Universities required increasing numbers of college equivalency units that were expensive to provide in small schools. School consolidation was seen as real progress among remaining rural elites in many communities, and larger and larger high schools were formed in order to accommodate more specialized curricula. Often, such consolidations pitted parents of students who were doers and makers against parents hoping for more academic possibilities for their children (DeYoung, 1995).

But the situation is actually more complex. .. Great diversity remains in rural America on dimensions of economy and demography, and these differences likely predict locations where contests over the school curriculum are still strong. Tom Gjelten (1982), for example, argues that there are several types of rural communities in America today, and that school issues related to livelihood and academics ought to be found. Former small communities in metropolitan fringe areas or those that are connected to urban centers via interstate highways have lost local identities and are now really satellite communities of the metropolis. Meanwhile, a few stable agricultural and mining communities can still be considered sustainable, and local schools may well play a role by not exporting most children to other places. Finally, there are economically depressed or geographically isolated communities far from metro areas and unlikely to have the resources (human or economic) to provide livelihood or academic possibilities to their children. This latter situation is often the case in Appalachia.

If and when local occupational health remains good, local school leaders yet persist in resisting the logic of bigger schools and more dedication to liberal arts and pre-college curricula. Alan Peshkin nicely portrayed the contest between local values and the structure of local opportunities versus a more cosmopolitan sentiment and higher academic emphasis in his study of a declining yet stable group of Illinois agricultural communities in the 1970s. In that study, the contention was over replacing the district superintendent; it involved how school board members felt about retaining and emphasizing the goals and curriculum dedicated to their place, versus arguments that the board ought to be looking outward rather than inward in hiring a new superintendent. Peshkin found to his surprise that Mansfield High still centered upon local livelihood and community even into the late 20th century:

> I conclude that the experience at MHS both reinforces contentment with small-town life and constrains many of its students from seeking, or seeking successfully, opportunities for greater mobility. The nature of the school experience seems to support a disposition to live in immediate surroundings. The impact of the particular educators Mansfield hires and the level of academic performance the community expects moderate the students' occupational, educational, and geographical mobility, though this is not an invariable consequence.

Reconsidering the Community

Peshkin's work, and that of others, further underscores a feature of rural high schools and their links to community that many know but few want to acknowledge: rural schools, especially high schools, have invariably been understood by local people as far more than only instructional sites as we now envision them. They have for over a hundred years been social centers, too. A centrally located and well attended high school facility signified civilization and culture in the mountains or on the prairie and refuted the

idea that citizens had to be living in metropolitan America to be important. Schools provided civic meeting places, sites for the arts and music, an athletic program that often competed with those of other small surrounding towns, and jobs for local citizens interested in either academic subjects, social uplift of children, or administration.

A major feature of most rural American schools and certainly their high schools revolved around interscholastic athletics, debate societies, bands and orchestras, and fundraising and social events for the local community even beyond the walls of the school itself (DeYoung, 1995). In rural America, community pride was often infused into sports programs, and basketball or football teams became and remain cornerstones in community identity (Fuller, 1982). The impact of the athletic programs upon community involvement *and* student effort and achievement in rural America have been widely reported (Coleman, 1961; Peshkin, 1978), and are not to be underestimated as we pursue discussions of "livelihood."

Peshkin argued, for example, that Mansfield's high school was a "hub of activity, the place where, when the lights are out in other public settings, save for the laundromat and the taverns, there is very likely something happening" (p. 147). The rural high school, under this interpretation, is and often remains clearly different from that of the city where all that glitters is usually outside the building. In his fieldwork, Peshkin particularly noticed, as have many others, the importance of athletics both to the students and to the local community. Once upon a time, rural schools operated under the philosophy that sports and other community-oriented programs were part of their educational mission. The emerging belief that high schools need to focus on academic standards and not on local sporting or cultural events is, in rural America, often a

traumatic confrontation between the community and the instructional functions of the high school.

Peshkin found:

> Approximately half the student body is engaged in interschool athletic events either as player, cheerleader, or manager. This proportion testifies not only to the interest such events hold for Mansfield youth, but also to the size of the school: the smaller the student enrollment, the higher the proportion of those engage in competitive athletics.

High schools are also, of course, social centers for youth themselves. I would be remiss not to note here that in a previous age, and yet today in some places, they serve as a marriage market of sorts. In metropolitan America many, if not most, middle class kids are currently expected to meet their future marriage partners in the university or afterwards. In rural places, particularly in those where adolescents plan on staying close to home and where livelihood skills can be attained still in the local school, connections to place may yet be cemented by local marriages at an earlier age. In each of the ethnographies cited above, how dating and marrying featured in the life of each school was a prominent theme. Rarely among educators today do we find such real-life matters worthy of discussion. Rather, they are treated as problems to be overcome.

Conclusions

Understandings of Livelihood, Academics and Community in rural places really does have a far more complicated history and set of issues than is generally understood. Described from the city or the metropolis, the rural school has been an enigma because those who work and study there have often had different connections to place and to livelihood than is to be found in demographically dense and economically diverse places.

I have just begun to scratch the surface on some of these differences; and others have waxed much more passionately than I. Their insights are well worth reading for those with interest (e.g., Theobald, 1997; Haas and Nachtigal, 1998).

The task before us as rural educators, it seems to me, is to make one of two choices. Maybe they can be pursued simultaneously, but I am less sanguine about this than those just cited. On the one hand, we can try to rebuild rural communities in America and help reconnect schools to places rather than using them as sorting machines for exporting children to metropolitan America. Both Theobald and Hass and Nachtagle speak to this hope. My sense is that this is a losing battle. In the cacophony of "globalism" today, we will be lucky just to be able to think regionally or nationally when it comes to education.

The other choice is to understand that what constitutes knowledge and pedagogy in America and elsewhere are functions not of some ultimate wisdom and truth, but are defined and negotiated by people with different amounts of power and in often very different contexts. Rural kids today need to know academics better than before not because academics are inherently better than educational aims previously more associated with livelihood, but instead because high schools now do need to prepare our youth for post-high school possibilities as well as whatever is locally possible. Furthermore, we need to not deprecate local values and hopes for local livelihoods as somehow inferior to academic interests. Were one to claim that 21st century American life offers us better incomes and health and whatever else the good life is considered to be, we need to be sure that rural children and youth are not the victims of "our" success. They were "us;" they are "us."

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